

Sweet Science

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Eddie and Daisy's admiration of Sophie has nothing to do with guilt; they feel no guilt, and are responding to Sophie's radiant goodness. (Sometimes Daisy wants Eddie to save for Sophie, to take love home to her which is somehow from both of them.) Neither of them knows that Sophie at her most angelic, when still a high-school girl, had had sexual adventures – willingly; indeed, she helped plan them – of a sort you would not have expected, especially if you believe what you read about kids of that era. Sophie is short, with curly dark hair, fair skin, tiny hands, waist and feet, yet a look of plumpness though she has never been plump and never had to diet. She's a librarian who knows how to get grants and to present a case to city politicians. She believes in her library, and is a capable manager of staff. It's a city library, conscientiously run.

Daisy is her good friend, director of cultural programs for the library, known sometimes to be both grumpy and goofy off the job. Quite tall and thin, hawkish features, big hands and feet: looks unexpectedly good in square-cut tailored clothes which seem abstract and unrelated to her form. Her touch for details, great and responsible memory, and taste in literature and music make her programs exceptionally satisfying. Popular as well – the library has a large clientele for its booktalks, film series, chamber concerts.

Eddie, Sophie's husband, is a chunky, sandy-curly-haired musician, stocky-looking though trim. He has been in Local 802, but doesn't like living in New York. Here he is a violist in the symphony, on the faculty of a good school, and sometimes does studio work for a company which has learned how to get high quality recordings made outside of big towns. You have likely heard his viola in a few commercials and on one pop recording which went gold.

Their town is a largish city with a reputation for dullness. That rap protects them, gives them a sort of privacy. In fact the city has a lively arts life and adequate audience support. Those who know don't want it to grow or boom. It's just fine as it is.

Eddie plays in a string quartet. Their cellist tends to attack sustained notes on the down-side of his lovely slow vibrato so that for just an instant he is a hair flat, not long enough for them all to seem off-key, but somehow odd nevertheless. Eddie had thought of saying something, but hesitates, for he loves the sound of their quartet, and the cellist's habit must be one of the things which gives the group its character. This evening they're learning a Haydn which none of them knows or has, so far as they can remember, even heard before. It's completely mysterious – is this spot just queer, or profound? What is Haydn up

to? They do one movement a number of times, each differently, experimenting: once Straight Ahead, brusque, full-Toscanini. Once quirky, with sharp differences of tempo when Haydn interrupts himself with what seems unrelated material. Once with gentle nuance and lots of *rubato*, with whoever has the main line – when that's clear – moving it around any way that feels right. All ways sound wonderful. Later Beethoven in one, all those years too early! In the *rubato* play-through, the second violin finds a place to let in a little air late in a phrase – he adds a “,” starts a down-bow in a new place, and the character of the whole piece is transformed. Eddie and Ellen, the first violinist, are very moved, Eddie almost to tears of love for the music, his instrument, his buddies in the quartet.

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Eddie and Daisy go to the fights. The town has a promoter and a corps of real fans, not quite enough to support a weekly card, but enough to allow fairly frequent fights if the promoter ballyhoos one or two names to draw the folks who know less but like hitting and a rough atmosphere. (Well, somewhat rough, anyway.) The Sports Editor of the daily paper understands and does what he can to help.

No need for secrets here – Eddie and Daisy are usually very careful not to be seen together, but this can be public: Sophie gets upset by blows to the head and encourages Eddie to take Daisy, who knows and appreciates the sport; sometimes they go with the Nolans, the opera-buffs who also love good boxing and know its fine points. The Nolans are older. Nolan's father actually owned some fighters in the '20s.

Daisy sees it as chess, though she wishes the fighters weren't hurting one another. The shorter guy has to take hard jabs and some body shots to get inside, she sees by a minute into the first round. He himself has a very strong jab, but it's hard to use in this fight. He has a Mexican-style double-left off the jab which works sometimes, but something odd happens with his legs and the other guy's when he uses it, and he ends up a little off-balance and unable to press. Maybe the gents in his corner will know what to do. Twice he lands a right cross to counter something the tall guy tries when crowded inside. So his hope is that his inside work will tire and slow the bigger man while he weathers the punishment; then maybe in late rounds he can catch up in scoring and maybe even stop his man.

But right now the tall guy's size and hand-speed are making life awful for him. He has pretty good lateral motion and keeps his mitts up, so a lot of the head-shots miss, graze or are picked off, but too many land hard. By the fourth round Daisy is in a sweat for him. Eddie hears Bartok and Piston; he also finds himself pulling for the shorter boxer.

This isn't the Main Go; this is the best of the well-matched prelims. The

promoter's prelims are always better than the bigger-name ten-rounder which he uses to draw the rest of the crowd. He has a real knack for putting together interesting match-ups, mainly in the faster lighter-weight divisions. Even the opening bout, a four-rounder between two new pros, was good.

Neither fighter was the usual wild-killer-without-defense – the promoter had seen both as Golden Glovers and knew they took coaching well and remembered their fundamentals. One, a dark youngster with a Latin name, did lose his cool briefly in the third when, after the other kid clipped him cleanly with a stinging uppercut just off the jaw and followed it quickly, while Pedrito was stunned, with a big left, right in the nose – he swung wildly to try to get control, to show he wasn't hurt, or maybe in rage because a hit to the nose can enrage you – but he remembered himself (or perhaps the screaming uncalm threesome in his corner howling "*Cálmate!*" and shrieking for him to cover and be cool did the reminding), remembered before the other guy, a smooth black kid named Willie with an eccentric haircut but no nonsense in his gloves, could take him apart. Pedrito even knew to clinch, and tried to lean heavily on Willie before the referee yelled "Break." Well-schooled!

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Daisy sits in the library auditorium listening to a trio practice. A good-natured swindler who, having turned some lovely bluffs and creeks into a neighborhood of high-cost homes and an upscale shopping center largely by manipulating the city council into building him the roads which made the whole thing fly, has now had second thoughts; he works for environmental causes and – here's old Daisy at work – has bought the library a very good Steinway. A son of the immigrant Chinese couple who run the second-best Chinese restaurant in the city is a world-class accompanist. Though he tours with big recitalists, he still lives here; he travelled to the Steinway plant to select the piano for them.

Now he is playing it with a French hornist and Eddie. Eddie is playing violin, not viola, and the three are in the slow movement of the Brahms *Eb* Trio. The hornist is very good, and pulls the tempo first way back, then presses forward, as he moves emotionally up to the high note, the concert *Eb*; it wrenches a sob from Daisy, who has never cried from music before. The violin part isn't hard, but must be played very cleanly. Eddie's violin tone is big and open. The Steinway is both powerful and bright. The empty hall is more resonant than you would usually want: the piano and the horn *ring* off the back wall. Yet it's perfect for this performance of this work by these three.

The piano and horn parts are very hard. Daisy notices that the pianist and hornist stare at one another slack-jawed and a little gaunt-eyed at the ends of movements. Daisy knows the look on Eddie, having seen it the first time that

they, surprised at their daring to speak their feelings and act upon them, made love. She hasn't seen it on other men before. Well, except boxers, sometimes. Willie and Pedrito, at the end of their first professional fight, too beat to pretend to be jaunty and fresh, yet eager to give one another a sweaty hug and a pat: gratitude for being so good, it seemed, for taking such blows, for punching so hard. Daisy has chatted with the Sports Editor – her works take her to the newspaper office sometimes – and asked about how boxers feel. "That's what's suprizing," he said. "They mostly love it. It's so total. They get high. The good ones have that balance between training-strength and instinct, discipline and animal aggression, yet the two guys out there in the ring – they're in another world, a different dimension."

Daisy blurs together the look the two young fighters exchanged as the referee led them out for the decision with what he sees on the faces of the hornist and pianist. Eddie, she sees, has his mouth shut, but he is spent and moved, too. His wide sound and the horn's emotional playing and the hall echo have made this a different work than she heard in the two recordings she listened to to learn the piece.

Now they are going to lunch together at the pianist's family's place. It's supposed to be Daisy's treat, but Daisy knows that the Lees won't let the waiter bring a bill. Which is just as well: Daisy has a son who is in very expensive therapy. He is bi-polar, and his medication seems to have stopped working. This is one reason she clings to both Eddie's love and Sophie's friendship so strongly. They give her strength, and her job gives her successes. The shrinks say that her boy's prognosis is hopeful, but any given day can be hell, especially when he is down" and filled with fears, fully aware of his condition, yet unable to control the terror it brings. He is sure in such times that if he is institutionalized again they will cut things in his brain, that he will die or be a "bland vegetable." And then the funny sixteen-year-old in him one day added, still hysterical, though, "A summer squash, Momma, a smooth-bumpy white-inside yellow summer squash," said with the same grim sarcasm that he used to describe his darkest visions and inventions.

His "ups" are almost as scary: he rages with humor and energy, inventing impossibly ambitious projects, and, astonishingly enough, sometimes completing them. You get caught up; you laugh, too – he's so brilliant, so funny, so capable – even though you know the clouds will roll in in a few hours, the frightful thunder rumble, the lightning explode.

Daisy's divorce had been a terror: a kind husband in a panic as he realized that his crankiness had gone beyond crankiness, that the nervousness was out of control, sure only that he had to be free of marriage. No "other woman," no crisis in his career – at least yet – just terrible aversion to Daisy (worse as she tried

to help), to the house, to their son – to life, apparently. He had offered generous support; Daisy and her lawyer had been in the odd position of insisting that he reduce the amount of support he suggested so that there would be enough left for him to live on decently. But these days, hospitalized, he cannot send anything. (Considerate even now that the “nameless terrors” have overtaken him, he has insisted on a hospital far from Daisy so that she will not be able to visit or help, will be forced to live her own life.)

Daisy must learn to save that life while still loving this son, and in these past weeks she has been better. When she was nine, Daisy had been in a Children’s Summer Theater play. The older boy who played opposite her forgot his lines and began to stammer; the frightened adult director, sneaking behind a flat to get close enough to whisper lines and instructions, tripped and tipped the flat, so a large wall of a fake stone house toppled toward the audience. And spindly Daisy somehow kept the play afloat, ad libbing dialogue while straight-arming the wall upright again, pushing the boy into place for his next lines and making up stage-business until things came together in time for the end of the scene. “You know what, Daisy?” the director had said afterwards, “Daisy, you’re a real trouper.” And she still was. She wishes that she could just tell Sophie that she is sleeping with Sophie’s husband. Why can’t the world be more reasonably organized? Lordy, she realizes as Eddie fills everyone’s cups with more tea, she wishes Sophie could come into bed with them, that that was OK and normal. She is not returning to the library after this post-rehearsal meal. She and Eddie are to meet at her place. She would not hurt Sophie; she loves her. Yet it is a shame that one can’t talk, isn’t it?

Ralph Sansom, the horn player, is saying as he twiddles his chopsticks that the affirmative-action implications of his playing in the symphony were funny. His and Eddie’s orchestra scored points because one hornist was “black.” “But I’m more some other things as well – Scots-Irish, maybe French, some Cherokee for sure. Chinese, too, did you know?” – this playfully, just as the waiter comes by with a fresh pot of tea, so Ralph can exchange a few phrases in Cantonese with him, much to the surprise of Bob Lee, the pianist. Bob hadn’t known of the hornist’s unusual military posting.

“Can you really speak it fluently?” Daisy wants to know. Ralph says he can’t, but that he does know more than what is in *The Tourist’s Friend*. That startles Eddie a little (though he doesn’t show it), for he had thought that *The Tourist’s Friend* was a private joke invented by him and his wife, a mythical guide-and-necessary-phrase book for visitors to this town, with listings of the things Eddie and Sophie have learned since they moved here from the East years ago: That you get your groceries in a “sack” here, not a “bag,” for instance; that you can hear superb country music and excellent chamber music – alternate

months! – at a regular covered-dish dinner-concert sponsored by a Methodist church on the city’s west side; that when the first guest decides it’s time to leave a party, often all the guests decide it’s time to leave, and all go home at once. But apparently he and Sophie didn’t invent *The Tourist’s Friend* – here is a China edition.

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Sophie among the stuffies: The library has a number of different support groups. Some are pretty jolly; this one, composed entirely of wealthy older women, is too solemn, at least today. Sophie has seen them show more evident good nature; they are not *really* cartoon arts-matrons. Yet at this late-afternoon affair they seem awfully straight. Sophie thinks it might be the season or the hour. But she circulates and mingles; indeed, she singles out the one Eddie had code-named Mommy Warbucks, who in her first conversations with Sophie a few years ago had come on strong for some attitudes just this side of book-banning. Sophie has learned that you can usually talk to the local bigots, sometimes even modify their perceptions over time. Sophie showed this woman that she shared several of her concerns; she truly did. Gradually she had tried to suggest to her that the means Mommy had in mind would not work. Now Sophie finds she actually likes the old gal in a number of ways: Mommy genuinely loves her family, and has come to value Sophie’s explanations of what her grandchildren might be up to. Sophie hopes it doesn’t go beyond skateboards, weird clothes and haircuts; she finds herself rooting for Mommy’s grandkids. She and Sophie trust one another in certain defined areas, and the areas grow with time. Mommy was a worry to this group, a book-burner amid the book-lovers; Sophie has managed not to disarm her, but at least to enable the others to treat her as a real member. There is now some communication.

But Lordy, today they are so ladylike. Sophie in their midst wonders how many of these proper matrons had felt the insane excitement of adventures like hers. She hopes they did, for her memories of those times are all good. She had never felt used or exploited – it all gave her too much pleasure. Her mind has wandered: she had left Mommy Warbucks and gone to get some punch, was standing at the edge of a circle of ladies, about to join their conversation when these high-school memories changed her chemistry and made her want to love her Eddie when she got home.

Sophie, waiting for punch at the reception, fantasizes about something she never did and never especially wanted to do, something, indeed, that is impossible, because the ages don’t match, the people in it are from different decades: she speaks on the phone with a boy she really liked in high school, and who called her in great adolescent agony several times when she was about a sophomore or junior to ask for a date, and whom she really wanted to date, but

never could on nights he suggested, so that he concluded, she supposed, that she didn't want to – all this is real, she did like him, he called, they never went out – and in her odd fantasy, which just flashes on her screen, though she is wide awake, while she speaks to this nice Norman in the phone-and-TV nook of her parents' Levittown home in 1949, the phone on the dark-wood old-fashioned water-stained little stand that always wobbled under the TV built-in under the stairs, a very "modern" feature of those homes, she plainly just a high school girl, has her plaid pleated skirt pulled up above her waist, her round young ass bare (she is attached to it, yet she sees it), and Eddie, at his present age, a virile and confident Eddie, is in her from below, she melting with excitement as she tries to control her voice, bent forward over the telephone to help Eddie, tries not to hurt Norman's feelings and to encourage him to call her again. Norman asked Mr. Scortluttie the best questions in History class. Norman was afraid of her because he thought she was pretty, she figures, and because he didn't know how nice-looking he seemed to her. And Eddie could always make her melt.

Now she has quite forgotten what it is the ladies are talking about. She snaps back to attention, eventually makes some suggestions about planning the Friends of the Library dinner – that had been the topic – but retains the ripple of excitement. Perhaps it communicates itself to these nice old girls, for Mrs. World (that's her real name, not one of Eddie's labels) unexpectedly grins and says something irreverent and teasing, and the group comes to life. Sophie leaves the affair smiling and waving, drives home very carefully with the radio off, pulls into their driveway and sits there to allow herself the unusual luxury of daydreaming. Sophie wonders how it was that she and Norman got caught in the common adolescent fears and games which, despite repeated efforts, kept them from managing to say to another, plainly, "Yes, I like you; let's go out. If one time's no good, let's find another. I really want to": While she and her circle of buddies had been able to say everything, everything, to be so kind and plain, to get so far from the complicated codes and tension which governed all their other dating. She had read a story in college, translated from Yiddish, about how, because of a small unselfish act by a humble man, there had been dancing in heaven, how you thought you heard the sounds of angel-wings when his child was born, when he held his wife, when he said a prayer, counselled his children, when he died. How, had some other small thing happened – perhaps a chance encounter with another blessed honest soul – the Messiah would have come. Had Sam, Mag, Buddy, Kay and she heard wings? Had their quiet acts of taking and giving pleasure without meanness, of ignoring rules and customs and acting on what seemed right, been the only such acts since time began? It would be funny, she thought, if there were a God or a World-Force or something, and the way to bring on a Golden Age or Salvation or Transcendent

Merger or the Happy Ending or whatever it was you believed was through happy screwing, good use of the organs and feelings you were given. The trouble was, you were given other organs and feelings as well.

("Territory, rage, love of power," was what Daisy would say the next day when Sophie raised the topic, telling Daisy her line of speculation without reference to the very private memories which had set it off in her mind. "Maybe other drives and emotions too. 'As well hate a seraph as a shark. Both were made by the same hand.'")

Eddie will be here soon. She wants his car in front of hers; when he arrives, she'll pull back so he can slip in first. Having fought off daydreaming on the drive home, she lets go now, sits and waits. The fall evening is pleasant; the car comfortable; her breathing changes. The high school kids in Sophie's circle come to her: Sam Plonner, who made them talk out all the variables, ground-rules, hazards. Kay Sesso, black-haired and sort of majestic, the Managing Editor of the school newspaper and a good cellist. Maggie Goedel, who looked cute and dumb, whose speech had the flat openness, the frequent "umm's," of a lot of the poorer kids of their town, who for all her curly short blond hair and cheerleader's looks was their most unfrightened thinker, a questioner of assumptions. Also a clever artist who was going to win a big scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design, who earned good money in high school with an after-school job in the advertising department of a large local department store: this before such places were driven under by discount stores or bought up by chains. "A world we have lost?" runs through Sophie's mind. It's a book title actually. Tall bucktoothed Buddy Benton, twisty, restless, all elbow and absolutely trustworthy, someone you could tell anything. He liked Sophie, but they had never dated; they were just buddies before the gentle orgies, though Sophie's discovery that she could tell him about her dates was one of the events which eventually made the orgies happen.

Once you could say what happened when you went "parking" with Ed Pappadapolous in his father's green Chevy, what he tried to do, what you wanted him to do, what you wouldn't let him do – and eventually, over coffee in a diner off Jericho Turnpike, after Buddy had confessed all manner of details about his date with Angie – so they could finally even try to say how they felt, what happened physically, what you were likely to do after you got home: once you could say things like that, you could even talk about how funny the whole business was. "Funny," they realized, meant "irrational," and before long Buddy and Sophie had added "immoral" and "dishonest," had decided that there ought to be a way. Then they had begun to invent a way.

Sam's rules, evolved after long bull-sessions, were finally pretty simple: no chances were to be taken. Nothing would happen until the five had arranged

a place and time safe from discovery. No booze: Sam liked to drink at parties himself, but booze might make someone careless. No pregnancy. Buying condoms was a real obstacle; the purchase was finally made from a machine at a truckers' gas station men's room in the next state, because nobody knew whether a drug store would sell them to kids, and neither of the boys – this was unimaginable for the girls – had the nerve to find out. Nobody to be cheated or left out. This one was the hardest to talk out, because bringing it up implied that you were worried. (But they learned after the first time that there were variables they hadn't known about; that, for instance, each of the girls had a very different rhythm, and that there are some limits to the erotic persistence of even teenage boys.)

Now years later when any of them met, the sense of gratitude endured: nobody had ever broken the trust, nobody had been hurt, everyone had remained considerate even when low and reptilian with lust. (As Sophie finds herself now in the driveway. She returns to the vision of herself at the telephone, evoking it consciously now, wanting Eddie to come home soon, yet half regretting that his arrival will mean breaking, at least momentarily, this spell.) Some images of those times – usually they were afternoons – one or another of the group held strongly through the years. Sophie's look of glowing, radiant happiness, color rising in a wave from the lower to the upper part of her face as she came, and her invariable gratitude to Buddy or Sam (once to Maggie, if the truth be known) for the joy they gave her. Buddy's bony butt, with its light reddish hair, bucking as he and Kay, their thrashiest combination, bounded along. Sophie remembers: she once had had the strongest inclination to tickle it: she, Madge and Sam were sitting in a heap, breathing hard and watching. So she did, though it took an effort to break the strong and pleasant daze she had been in. She ran her fingers softly in his fuzz, she even touched loosely around his anus, and when he and Kay were done, she rubbed her cheek softly on his rump and kissed his hip.

Kay thought that maybe sex would never be this good again, and that they should try, when they were grown and married, never to compare. "Never to measure, you mean," said Mag. "Never to measure sex with your husband with sex here." But it *had* been as good again for Sophie: for her, these were great memories, like a special, sealed bubble seated low in her torso, of love, trust, affection, emitting now and again shudders of erotic pleasure. But not benchmarks for scoring an unsuspecting Eddie. Her mind didn't work on benchmarks. That is what made the unwilling daydream about Norman so unexpected.

Sophie does not even hear the beginning of the crunch of Eddie's tires in their driveway; the sound has been there before she knows he has arrived home.

She is already making love to him when she describes a sort of 8 with her left arm out the car window to tell him to back out so she can too, and then go in first so her car will be in back, in the leave-first position. Eddie understands; they do their ponderous wheeled dance and get out of their cars. Carrying instrument, music stand-case and a briefcase full of music, chunky Eddie has no free hands, so she hugs him, then, as they walk up the narrow curved walk, bends to butt her head into the small of his back and pushes him along. It is playful enough should neighbors be watching, but Sophie isn't exactly playful. "Move," she says as they get inside the door. "I'm hot. And I love you. I'm not sure in which order." And Eddie, who has "saved" as frantic Daisy asked him to, feels neither unfulfilled nor keenly eager, and certainly not wicked. After a while, he comes to feel just very, very good. "I am pleased" comes into Sophie's head when the time comes for indolence; the phrase is absurd enough that she says it aloud. "I am pleased." And Sophie wishes she could tell him everything, everything that had been running through her mind. But Sophie is wise and keeps it to herself.

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The quartet performs Prokofiev in a recital hall at a college about a hundred miles east of their city. They have played here before on the school's concert series; this is a good audience. They have argued about this piece. Should it be "morose"? Eddie sees it as acid. It is wartime Prokofiev, one of those works written in Stalin's special retreat for artists. The tension between "morose" and "acid" is not really resolved, and this fact gives their reading an inner charge; they are absolutely together, yet they are pulling and tugging, struggling. The performance is too much for an emigré, a tall stooped elderly man Eddie has talked to at receptions in past years after concerts here, a fellow who used to teach violin – Gaydebouroff or some such name. The old guy weeps, then sobs audibly, can't control it; rises so that you see his great slim height even with the stoop, despite his age; is wracked by another sharp intake of breath, scoots over people till he reaches the right aisle, puts a handkerchief to his face, leaves quietly. Eddie and the cellist see it all; the violinists don't – they have their backs to that side of the house. No distraction. Eddie is impressed; he would not, a few days before, have thought that Prokofiev could do that. Suddenly, like holograms, phrases appear as in the air between him and the audience. "Oh!" says Daisy. "Save! Please save! For Sophie!" And: "Clinch! Hold on! Last the round and you'll be OK!"